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THE ORIGIN OF TOTEMISM.[1]

By FRANZ BOAS.

IN the numerous discussions of totemism published during the last few years much has been said about the "American theory" of totemism—a theory for which I have been held responsible conjointly with Miss Alice C. Fletcher and Mr. Charles Hill-Tout. This theory is based on the idea that the clan totem has developed from the individual manitou by extension over a kinship group. It is true that I have pointed out the analogy between totem legend and the guardian-spirit tale among the Kwakiutl, and that I have suggested that *among this tribe* there is a likelihood that under the pressure of totemistic ideas the guardian-spirit concept has taken this particular line of development.[2] Later on Mr. Hill-Tout[3] took up my suggestion and based on it a theory of totemism by generalizing the specific phenomena of British Columbia. About the same time Miss Fletcher[4] gave a wider interpretation to her observations among the Omaha. Mr. J. G. Frazer[5] and Emile Durkheim[6] both discuss my arguments from this point of view. Their interpretation of my remarks is undoubtedly founded on their method of research, which has for its object an exhaustive interpretation of ethnic phenomena as the result of a single psychic process.

My own point of view—and I should like to state this with

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[1] Expanded from Tsimshian Mythology (*Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Vol. 31, pp. 515–518).

[2] *Bastian-Festschrift*, Berlin, 1896, p. 439; Report of the North-Western Tribes of Canada (*British Association for the Advancement of Science*, 1898, Reprint p. 48); see also Report on the North-Western Tribes of Canada, 1889, Reprint pp. 24 *et seq.*; "The Social Organization and the Secret Societies of the Kwakiutl Indians" (*Report U. S. National Museum for 1895*, Washington, 1897, pp. 332, 336, 662).

[3] *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1901–02, Vol. VII, Sec. II, pp. 6 *et seq.*

[4] *The Import of the Totem, a Study from the Omaha Tribe* (Salem, Mass, 1897).

[5] *Totemism and Exogamy*, IV, p. 48.

[6] *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, pp. 246 *et seq.*

some emphasis—is a quite different one.[1] I do believe in the existence of analogous psychical processes among all races wherever analogous social conditions prevail; but I do not believe that ethnic phenomena are simply expressions of these psychological laws. On the contrary, it seems to my mind that the actual processes are immensely diversified, and that similar types of ethnic thought may develop in quite different ways. Therefore it is entirely opposed to the methodological principles to which I hold to generalize from the phenomenon found among the Kwakiutl and to interpret by its means all totemic phenomena. I will state these principles briefly.

First of all it must be borne in mind that ethnic phenomena which we compare are seldom really alike. The fact that we designate certain tales as myths, that we group certain activities together as rituals, or that we consider certain forms of industrial products from an esthetic point of view, does not prove that these phenomena, wherever they occur, have the same history or spring from the same mental activities. On the contrary, it is quite obvious that the selection of the material assembled for the purpose of comparison is wholly determined by the subjective point of view according to which we arrange diverse mental phenomena. In order to justify our inference that these phenomena are the same, their comparability has to be proved by other means. This has never been done. The phenomena themselves contain no indication whatever that would compel us to assume a common origin. On the contrary, wherever an analysis has been attempted we are led to the conclusion that we are dealing with heterogeneous material. Thus myths may be in part interpretations of nature that have originated as results of naïvely considered impressions (Naturanschauung); they may be artistic productions in which the mythic element is rather a poetic form than a religious concept; they may be the result of philosophic interpretation, or they may

[1] "The Origin of Totemism" (*Journal of American Folk-Lore*, XXIII, 1910, p. 392); "Some Traits of Primitive Culture" (ibid., XVII, 1904, p. 251); *Psychological Problems in Anthropology*, Lectures and Addresses delivered before the Department of Psychology and Pedagogy in celebration of the Twentieth Anniversary of Clark University, Worcester, 1910, pp. 125 *et seq.*; see also *The Mind of Primitive Man*, pp. 174 *et seq.*

have grown out of linguistic forms that have risen into consciousness. To explain all these forms as members of one series would be entirely unjustifiable.

What is true of wider fields of inquiry is equally true of narrower fields. Decorative art as applied by an artist who devotes much time and an inventive genius to the making of a single beautiful object, and decorative art as applied in factory production, which occurs in certain primitive industries as well as in modern industries, are not comparable, for the mental processes applied in these two cases are not alike. Neither are the free invention of design in a familiar technique and the transfer of foreign designs from an unfamiliar technique to another familiar one comparable. To disregard these differences and to treat decorative art as though the psychological processes involved were all of the same character means to obscure the problem.

The phenomenon of totemism presents a problem of this kind. A careful analysis shows that the unity of this concept is a subjective, not an objective one.

I quite agree with the view of Doctor Goldenweiser,[1] who holds that the specific contents of totemism are quite distinct in character in different totemic areas. Common to totemism in the narrower sense of the term is the view that sections of a tribal unit composed of relatives or supposed relatives possess each certain definite customs which differ in content from those of other similar sections of the same tribal unit, but agree with them in form or pattern. These customs may refer to taboos, naming, symbols, or religious practices of various kinds, and are in their special forms quite distinctive for different totemic areas. There is no proof that all these customs belong together and are necessary elements of what Doctor Goldenweiser calls a "totemic complex." Since the contents of totemism as found in various parts of the world show such important differences, I do not believe that all totemic phenomena can be derived from the same psychological or historical sources. Totemism is an artificial unit, not a natural one.

[1] "Totemism, an Analytical Study" (*Journal of American Folk-Lore*, XXIII, 1910, pp. 179 *et seq.*).

I am inclined to go a step farther than Doctor Goldenweiser does in his later publications. I consider it inadvisable to draw a rigid line between totemic phenomena in a still more limited sense,—namely, in so far as the characteristics of tribal exogamic sections deal with the relations of man to animals and plants,—but believe that we should study all the customs connectedly, in their weaker form as well as in their most marked totemic forms.

Although we must lay stress upon the subjective character of the groups that we isolate and make the subject of our studies, it is important to bear in mind that the processes by which extended groups of mental activities are systematized by retrospective thought (that is by reason), occur also as an ethnic phenomenon in each social unit, so that the unification of heterogeneous material that we attempt as an ill-founded scientific method, is only one aspect of a wide range of ethnic phenomena, the essential feature of which is the remodeling of activities, thoughts, and emotions under the stress of a dominant idea. Thus, in the case of totemism the dominant idea of exogamic division has attracted the most varied activities of most diverse origin which now appear to the people themselves as a unit, and to us as a problem that we are tempted to solve as though it were the result of a single historical process, and as though it had its historical origin in a single psychological condition. I have discussed associations of this type in one of the essays to which I referred before.[1]

It follows from this consideration, that under the stress of a uniform dominant idea analogous forms may develop from distinct sources. Thus I do not feel convinced that the substratum of the totemism of the tribes of northern British Columbia and southern Alaska must have been the same. On the contrary, there seems to be evidence showing that their beginnings may have been quite different. Still, historical contact, and the effect of the idea of privilege attached to position, seem to have modeled the totemic customs of these tribes and of their southern neighbors, so that they have assumed similar forms. We call this development from distinct sources "convergence," no matter whether the assimilation is brought about by internal psychic or by external historical causes.

[1] *Some Traits of Primitive Culture*, 1904.

In order to state my position in regard to the theoretical problem definitely, I have to add a third point. Wundt[1] and Durkheim[2] use the term "totemic viewpoint" in a sense quite different from the one that I am accustomed to connect with it. While they do not disregard the connection between social group and totemic ideas, they lay stress upon the identification of man and animals; that is, a characteristic feature of totemism in the most restricted sense of the term. This idea occurs in many other aspects of the mental life of man,—in his magic, art, etc. Neither is this view an essential part of the totemic complex in its widest sense. It seems to me that if we call this the basis of totemic phenomena, one trait is singled out quite arbitrarily, and undue stress is laid upon its totemic association. It appears to me, therefore, an entirely different problem that is treated by these authors,—a problem interesting and important in itself, but one which has little bearing upon the question of totemism as a social institution. Their problem deals with the development of the concepts referring to the relation of man to nature, which is obviously quite distinct from that of the characterization of kinship groups. The only connection between the two problems is that the concepts referring to the relation of man to nature are applied for the purpose of characterizing social, more particularly kinship groups.

I am inclined to look at the totemic problem as defined before in a quite different manner. Its essential feature appears to me the association between certain types of ethnic activities and kinship groups (in the widest sense of the term), in other cases also a similar association with groups embracing members of the same generation or of the same locality. Since, furthermore, exogamy is characteristic of kinship groups, endogamy of generation groups or local groups, it comes to be the association of varying types of ethnic activities with exogamy or endogamy. The problem is, how these conditions arose.

The recognition of kinship groups, and with it of exogamy, is a

[1] *Völkerpsychologie*, Vol. II, Part 2 (1906), pp. 238 *et seq.*; *Elemente der Völkerpsychologie*, 1912, pp. 116 *et seq.*

[2] *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse.*

universal phenomenon. Totemism is not. It is admissible to judge the antiquity of an ethnic phenomenon by its universality. The use of stone, fire, language, is exceedingly old, and it is now universal. On this basis it is justifiable to assume that exogamy also is very old. The alternative assumption, that a phenomenon of universal occurrence is due to a psychic necessity that leads to it regularly, can be made for the kinship group, not for the other cases. We may, therefore, consider exogamy as the condition on which totemism arose.

When exogamy existed in a small community, certain conditions must have arisen with the enlargement of the group. The size of the incest group may either have expanded with the enlargement of the group, or individuals may have passed out of it, so that the group itself remained small. In those cases in which, perhaps owing to the ever-recurring breaking-up of the tribes into smaller units, cohesion was very slight, the exogamic group may always have remained restricted to the kinship group in the narrow sense of the term, so that there must always have been a large number of small co-ordinate independent family groups. A condition of this type, which is exemplified by the Eskimo, could never lead to totemism.

On the other hand, when the tribe had greater cohesion, the consciousness of blood relationship may well have extended over a longer period; and if the idea of incest remained associated with the whole group, a certain pressure must soon have resulted from the desire to recognize at once an individual as belonging to the incest group. This may be accomplished by the extension of the significance of terms of relationship, by means of which the members of the incest group may be distinguished from the rest of the tribe. Many systems of relationship include such a classification of relatives; but with increasing size of habitat or tribe, this form must also ultimately lead to the passing of individuals of unknown relationship out of the incest group.

The assignment of an individual to the incest group is easiest when the whole group is given some mark of recognition. As soon as this existed, it became possible to retain the incest or exogamic group, even when the family relationship of each individul was

no longer traceable. It is not necessary that such an assignment should be made by naming the group. Common characteristics, like a ritual or symbols belonging to the whole group, would have the same result.

It is obvious that this characterization of an incest group presupposes the development of the concept of the unilateral family. Where this concept does not prevail, permanent differentiation of subgroups of the tribe can hardly develop. The origin of the unilateral family must probably also be looked for in the conditions of life of the primitive economic group. Where permanent marital relations prevailed, and both maternal and paternal lines were represented in the economic group, conditions for the development of a unilateral family were absent. A case of this kind is presented by the Eskimo. Where, however, marital conditions were unstable and the women remained members of the parental economic group, maternal descent was the only one possible. Where in the case of more permanent marital relations either husband or wife separated from his or her parental group and joined the opposite parental group, conditions favored the growth of unilateral families. Such changes of domicile may have been determined by a variety of considerations. They would result even in primitive conditions where property right in the man's hunting territory existed, and in which, therefore, the strange woman would join the economic group of the man. We might expect in this case the development of paternal families. When, on the other hand, property right in agricultural land prevailed, the man may have joined the woman's group and a maternal family would have developed. Possibly this may be related to the prevalence of maternal descent among the agricultural tribes of North America.

It is not my aim to follow out here the development of the unilateral family. I merely wish to point out that a varied development may be expected under varying primitive conditions.

It will readily be seen that the elements of totemic organization are given wherever a unilateral family is designated by some characteristic feature.

Furthermore, wherever unilateral descent prevails, either

paternal or maternal, there must be a tendency towards a decrease of the number of lines that constitute the exogamic units. This must be the case the more, the smaller the number of individuals constituting the tribal unit and the slower the rate of increase of population. If we assume as initial point a number of women, all representing distinct lines, then all those men (or women) whose descendants do not reach maturity and those who have only sons (or daughters, as the case may be) will not become originators of lines, and obviously the number of lines will decrease with the progress of generations, unless this tendency is counteracted by new accessions or by sub-division into new lines. In small social units the reduction would continue until only two exogamic units are left. Historical evidence of the extinction of unilateral families is represented in the disappearance of families of the European nobility.[1]

The three lines of development, namely the restriction of the incest group to the family without the occurrence of large exogamic groups, the extension of terms of relationship over larger groups, and the naming or other characterization of exogamic groups are all represented in the ethnological data that have been collected.

If the theory outlined here is correct, we must expect to find a great variety of devices used for the purpose of characterizing exogamic groups, which must develop according to the general cultural type to which the people belong. It is obvious that in such cases, when the characterization of the group is due to the tendency to develop a distinguishing mark, all these marks must be of the same type, but different in contents. It does not seem plausible that distinguishing traits should belong to entirely distinct domains of thought; that one group might be recognized by a name, another one by a ritual, a third one by crests or emblems. The fundamental principle of classification as manifested in the mental life of man shows that the basis of classification must always be founded on the same fundamental concepts. We may conclude, conversely, that the homology of distinguishing marks of social divisions of a tribe is a proof that they are due to a classificatory tendency.

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[1] Fahlbeck, *Der Adel Schwedens.*